

Social worker project's supporters praise benefits, call for expansion

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A social worker pilot program conducted in part at the Daviess County Department of Public Advocacy saved the state money while reducing recidivism, a study says.

The University of Louisville this week released its findings that indicated the Social Worker Pilot Project, which was funded in 2006 by the General Assembly, not only paid for itself but saved Kentucky \$300,000.

The program placed social workers in public defenders' offices in Owensboro, Bowling Green, Morehead and Covington from October 2006 to October 2007. The goal was to determine if the workers could divert defendants from jail by addressing their addictive behaviors or mental illnesses with treatment providers in the community.

Rachel Pate, a forensic social worker at the Daviess County office, said the system uses a "holistic approach" by allowing the professionals to visit with the individuals and their families to get to the root of the problem that causes them to commit crimes. A plan is then created to address the problem using alcohol, drug or mental-health treatment rather than just incarceration.

During the pilot program, which covered 17 counties, 229 adults and juveniles were assisted. In Daviess County, Pate worked with 40 adults and 27 juveniles. The study said 72 percent of adults who received substance-abuse treatment stayed in or completed treatment programs, as did 67 percent who received mental-health treatment.

The study boasts that after six months, 80 percent of those who were referred to job training were still in their assigned programs or had completed them.

Rod Barber, who co-authored the report, said the financial savings of the program are documented and said the potential savings should not be overlooked.

"The pilot saved approximately 30,000 days, or 82 years, of incarceration at a savings of nearly \$300,000" in one year, Barber said. "Kentucky saved \$3.25 of incarceration costs for (every) \$1 invested. If the state expanded the program statewide by adding another 28 social workers, it would have the potential to save at least \$3.1 million annually."

That request has been given to Gov. Steve Beshear by the Department of Public Advocacy during planning for the 2009-2010 budget. Pilot co-chair Dawn Jenkins said the group expects to learn Tuesday if it is approved.

The success of the program is already being echoed throughout Daviess County. Henry "Mac" Griffin, a former Daviess Circuit Court judge, said he recently saw Pate's work firsthand during a case in which a defendant needed treatment. "It is likely that the treatment program implemented in the case will reduce the risk of the (defendant) from re-offending in the future," Griffin said.

Pate said she has seen positive results that started with her first client. "My very first client is living his dream," she said. "He had a long history of substance abuse and had even had trouble as a teen. It all boiled down to severe drug use. ... He's now a successful father, has a career and he is reaching out to those in need now."

The social worker said she was "pleasantly surprised" by how quickly the community embraced the idea and local treatment providers worked with her as she found assistance for the defendants' needs. She said that while she can address roadblocks in people's lives, it's up to them to improve.

"The bottom line is, it's up to the client," she said. "I tell them, it's like a basketball team and (they're) the point guard and shot guy -- I'll give you the ball, but you've got to roll with it."

As incarceration and its costs continue to rise, Jenkins said it is critical that Kentucky adopt this program.

About 32,000 people are serving time in Kentucky jails and prisons, with costs climbing from \$371.5 million in 2006 to almost \$417.6 million today, she said. And those left untreated are more likely to re-offend, the study said.

The Department of Corrections says 34 percent of people released from jail re-offend. The Bureau of Justice at the University of Kentucky reported that 67 percent of those incarcerated have an addiction, and 56 percent are mentally ill.

"I think this is an opportunity that has to be capitalized on," Jenkins said. "It's a no-brainer. We're incarcerating too many who are not getting treatment in Kentucky jails."

Pate said she was surprised how many of her clients had never been diagnosed or received treatment for their problems. She said some of them simply needed assistance furthering their education so they could receive jobs to better their lives.

Jerry Johnson, directing public advocate for the Daviess County office, said he was impressed to see how quickly clients opened up to working with social workers. Johnson said he was happy to see the amount of money the program saved the state but was not surprised by its success.

"This will save Kentucky money and help defendants receive treatment," Johnson said.
"It serves to help them from re-offending and helps decrease the number of persons incarcerated."